



THE PESSIMAL HERO

A NaNoWriMo Novel
By Darrin Snider

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CHAPTER ONE

*[*POP* ... Hissssss] That's li—[CRACK]*

(That's life)

That's wha—[CLUNK] people say

*You're riding high in Ap--[*POP* ... Hissssss], shot down in [CRACK]—ay*

But I know I—[CLUNK] change that tune

*When I'm back on [*POP* ... Hissssss], back on top in [CRACK]—une*

By the thirtieth play of the song, the lyrics had lost all their meaning. Hal O'Grady diligently held his dying mother's hand and held back tears. He brushed her hair, needlessly, out of her eyes and ran the back of his hand over her cheek.

*I said that's [*POP* ... Hissssss]*

(That's [CRACK]—fe

And as funny as it may seem

*[CLUNK] people ge--[*POP* ... Hissssss] their kicks*

Stomp—[CRACK] on a dream

But I don't let it, let it get me down

*[CLUNK] this fi--[*POP* ... Hissssss] old world, it keeps [CRACK]--nin' around*

“What the hell’s wrong with your phone?” His sister, Lucy, gestured at the cracked iPhone sitting on the all-purpose tray next to the hospital bed.

“What? Oh, it got stepped on by a 7-foot landshark. Well, I mean, not a real landshark, just a normal sized guy in a suit.”

“I meant that song keeps cutting out and skipping.”

“It’s her copy.”

“And it sounds like it’s playing too slow.”

“Her turntable needs a new drive belt, yeah.”

“You mean to tell me you went to mom’s house, dragged that old record player out of the attic, went through all of the boxes to find a scratched up 45, and held your phone up to the speaker to make a recording?!”

“Well, I set it down on the speaker. I needed both hands to press down on the back panel hand hold the power cord in just the right position so that it didn’t short out.”

“We live in the 21st century. We’ve got digital recordings, remasters, remixes, even mash-ups. Come on, it’s supposed to be Frank Sinatra. This sounds more like Christopher Lee after two valiums and a tin of Stillhouse. You’ve heard of YouTube, right?”

“Look, I read all about Alzheimer’s and dementia. They say musical recall is the second-to-last part of the brain to go, followed by commercial. If she’s in there at all, she remembers this. The pops and scratches are probably even more subconsciously engrained than the lyrics to her. It has to be this version. It’s the one she played all our lives. It’s the one she knows. It’s familiar.”

*[CLUNK] been a pup--[*POP* ... Hissssss], a pauper, a pirate, a po—[CRACK]*

A pawn and a king

I've been up and down and over and out

*And I [CLUNK] one thi--[*POP* ... Hissssss]*

Each time I fi--[CRACK] myself

*[CLUNK] on my [*POP* ... Hissssss]—ace*

I pick my--[CRACK] up and get

Back [CLUNK] the race

His mother, coughed once, then went back to her shallow, uneven breathing.

“Well, not long now, either way, I would think,” Lucy offered. “How long have you been playing that?”

“I dunno. About an hour.”

“An hour?! Are you seriously going to play that on a loop until—”

Hal cut her off, “I don’t know.” He sighed and looked at his mother lying there. “Maybe.” He squeezed her hand, there was no response. “It was her favorite song.”

“You’re not trying to speed the process up are you?”

“Shut up!”

*[*POP* ... Hissssss]--at's life*

(That's life)

[CRACK]--tell you, I can't de--[CLUNK]

*I thought of quitting, ba--[*POP* ... Hissssss]*

But my heart just ai--[CRACK] gonna buy it

And i--[CLUNK] didn't think it was worth one single try

*I'd jump right on a big bir--[*POP* ... Hissssss] and then I--[CRACK] fly*

The husky woman struggled a sigh once more. A tear ran out of the corner of her eye. Hal wiped it gently and let several of his own join it.

"It's okay, Mom. We're all here. We all love you."

*[CLUNK] been a [*POP* ... Hissssss]--pet, a pauper, a pi--[CRACK], a poet*

A pawn and a ki--[CLUNK]

been up and down and over and out

*And I--[*POP* ... Hissssss] one thing*

Ea--[CRACK] time I find myself lay--[CLUNK]

on my face

I just pick myself up and get

*Back in --[*POP* ... Hissssss] race*

The woman made two weak, half hearted coughs. Her eyes flew open. She drew a sharp intake of air, and froze, staring at the ceiling.

There was no exhale.

Tha--[CRACK] life

(Tha--[CLUNK])

*That's life and I can't --[*POP* ... Hissssss] it*

Many ti--[CRACK] I thought o--[CLUNK] out but my heart won't buy it

*But if there's no--[*POP* ... Hissssss] shaking come this he--[CRACK] July*

I'm gon—[CLUNK] roll myself up

*In a big ba-[*POP* ... Hissssss] and die*

[CRACK] My, my ...

There was still no exhale. No blinking. Hal stared in anticipation at the lifeless husk that was once his mother, still staring at the ceiling.

“And so it goes,” Lucy said, breaking down at last.

Hal, continued to hold his mother’s hand, staring confused at the lifeless husk in anticipation her last exhale. “Mom?” he whispered. “Mom!”

It never came.

“How the hell did she do that?” He laughed slightly through tears.

“You expected something else?”

“I don’t know what I expected. I guess something a bit more ...”

“Final?”

“Meaningful,” Hal decided.

Lucy shrugged and wiped her face, “That’s life,” she offered, unironically.

Hal shot her a look, “That’s our mother,” he said half-angrily, half out of grief. “She spent seventy-five years caring for others, making a difference in people’s lives. She raised a family. She created art. She had dreams she hadn’t even gotten around to yet. It just ends quietly like this?”

“Apparently so,” Lucy said, walking over to the wall and pressing the nurse call button.

Hal rolled his eyes. “What do we do now?”

“Well. Uncle Benito is down in the cafeteria having breakfast.”

“Still?! He’s been down there for four hours.”

“You know how he’s a freak for girls in hairnets. It’s weird.”

“I suppose I should go tell him,” Hal said. “He hates you.”

“He doesn’t hate me. Does he?”

“You killed it cat.”

“Well, I have a half-hearted explanation that will serve as the punchline to a joke Darrin hasn’t written.”

Hal found his uncle Benito right where he expected in the hospital cafeteria. He was halfway through a large cup of coffee and a lime seafood jello salad, ogling a middle-aged woman behind the counter. As soon as he saw Hal’s facial expression, his eyes sunk.

“It’s over then.”

“Yes,” Hal sighed, “I’m so sorry, Uncle Benito.”

Benito smiled slightly. “It’s okay, Hal. I accepted this a long time ago.” He took a sip of coffee and stared out the window. “It’s a horrible thing, this disease. It takes them from us twice. Once when the mind goes, and then again months later when the body catches up.”

Hal nodded. “It was very peaceful. Just a few short breaths. We were even playing her favorite song when she finally went.”

“Well, then, we did what we could. We should be happy knowing that at least.” Benito smiled.

“I suppose so.”

“What’s wrong then, Hal?”

“I don’t know. It just makes you think about life. About your own life. You spend decades here on earth trying to make a difference, or an impact, and then to just go quietly and pretty much alone without any fanfare. It just makes you wonder what the point of the whole thing is.”

Benito nodded. “You don’t have children of your own. To your mother, you two WERE the difference she made in the world. She would not want a procession or big fuss over her life, because to her, you two are the continuation of it. Through you two, it’s still happening.”

“So, you’re telling me I have to have children to understand the point of life?”

“I am saying if you live your life, it will make its own meaning, and when it is your time to go, you will see what that meaning is, and it won’t seem so bad.” He paused and shrugged, “At least that’s what those harpies on The View keep telling me. I’m not so sure I believe any of it.”

“What do you believe?”

Benito attempted to look serious. “I believe in a fine cigar, a good bourbon, and a beautiful woman at your side. Then I go to church on Sunday and thank God for them. You kids today just make everything more complicated with your technology and fancy food and drinks from around the world. I keep seeing commercials, ‘You haven’t lived until you drank charcoal water,’ and ‘your life is incomplete until you try charcoal ice cream.’ Have you seen these things? What’s with all the black food? You kids are supposed to be into all this natural and organic stuff, but now suddenly all the food is black, and expensive. Something as simple and basic as water, and you kids will pay eight bucks a bottle just to take a photo with it. But hey, everybody has a profile picture of themselves eating black food, so they must really be living now, right? So, what do you do? You don’t ask if you actually do feel more alive or have had some epiphany. No, you get the black food, you take pictures of yourself eating, and you try to convince your friends that you’re living your best life, meanwhile there’s a shortage of laxatives, so I have pay three times as much on eBay. Eventually, black food becomes a thing for a few months, then it goes away because rainbow food is popular and black food is out. And there you are: strung out on charcoal, jonesing for a bunt barbecue briquette to suck on, and not feeling any more alive than before you bought \$45 worth of black food with powdered rocks in it.”

“Didn’t you used to keep rocks as pets a few decades back?”

“When your mother and I grew up, we cabbage and potatoes every night for dinner. On Sundays, we would get meat in our cabbage. It was simple. Not like today, where you have to try everything, as if you are not living life right if you miss something. Just find what makes you happy and stop looking after that. You like pizza? Just get a pizza. God will sort out the rest.”

Hal smirked. “Yeah, well God and I haven’t exactly been on speaking terms for years.”

“That’s a very cynical thing to say. You don’t believe anymore then?”

“I don’t DISbelieve. I just lost faith, I guess. I really wish I still had it.”

“So, what do you think will happen when you die?”

“Well,” Hal said, “I’m still a good person, and I still try to follow the whole Judeo-Christian thing about being nice to others and not sleeping with their wives or building giant gold statues of cattle. So, I guess, when I die, either He’ll appear to me to comfort me – which would automatically restore my faith -- or I will just pass into oblivion and not even know I died, so no regrets.”

“That’s a very cynical view of death.”

“What’s a happy view of death?”

“To die peacefully after a long and happy life, knowing in your heart that your reward is coming. Just as your mother did. Don’t die with a heavy soul, worried about meaning, or purpose or any of the earthly things. You’re dead, that’s for someone else to decide.”

Hal smiled. “So, you’re about to give me the spiel about being bound to earthly things, which makes me evil?”

“You are not evil,” Benito nodded encouragingly. “You’re a teacher. That’s very respectable.”

“I’m a P.E. teacher,” Hal corrected him.

“No difference.”

“I coach Jr. High girls’ volleyball.”

“Okay, maybe that’s a bit creepy for a man your age.” He waved his hand trying to clear the image that was trying to engrain itself in his mind. “Still, you are here. In this moment, you care more about someone else than you do your own comfort. That means you’re not evil. But enough of this talk. You are an orphan now. What are you going to do? Do you need help with anything?”

“No, Lucy’s filling out the paperwork upstairs. Mom made all the final arrangements years ago, so there’s really nothing we need to do.”

“Well then you go home. I’ll see you at the funeral home.”

Hal shuddered as he left the sterile, antiseptic smells of the hospital and entered the lowest level of the grimy exhaust-filled parking garage. Taking a few minutes to orient himself and remember where he had parked, he slowly sulked across rows of cars before finally spotting his in a dark corner furthest away from the exit. As he approached, he stopped to admire the candy apple red 2020 Porche Cabriolet convertible parked next to him – and in typical fashion taking up two spots in a garage that was already filled to capacity.

An ominous high-pitched buzzing -- faint at first, but gradually growing louder – echoed through the garage. Every citizen of the city knew the noise, and had come to dread it. Hal steeled himself for the inevitable confrontation and watched as three rental e-scooters rode into view down the ramp from the level above.

“Whazzup, buddy? How about givin’ us a ride in your car?” the obvious leader of the gang said. He couldn’t be more than 14, Hal decided.

Of all the things that could make his day worse, what with your mother having died a few hours ago, getting carjacked in the hospital parking lot was one of the few things that made the list, Hal thought. He regarded the three ruffians, all teenagers, scrawny, and still standing with one foot on their scooters, which would give him an advantage should he decide to fight them. The girls he coached on the volleyball team were bigger, he decided, though he’d never really thought to fight any of them.

“So whadda say, pops? You givin’ us a ride, or do you want us to trash that thing for ya?” The leader pulled something akin to a box-cutting knife out of his pocket. Hal momentarily flinched, thinking it might have been something dangerous. What did they hope to do with that? For a spit second, Hal couldn’t fathom why the scooter gangs would be so interested in his ever-trusty 2006 Toyota Camry in the first place. Sure, maybe if he drove an expensive convertible sports car ...

... like a 2020 Porche Cabriolet ...

... and he was the type of douche nozzle who would park it diagonally and take up multiple spots

...

The day was suddenly looking up. “Trash it, I guess.”

“You’re serious?!” one of the kids said.

“I’m not a taxi service, plus those things would probably outrun my crapwagon on those things anyway.”

“Doesn’t that have a twin-turbo 3.0-liter flat-six?”

“Oh! That?” He pointed at the Cabriolet. “You think I drive that? No. That’s me over there, the 2.4-liter slightly leaky 4.”

“Shit,” the three ruffians looked at each other embarrassed. “I told you we should wait until he opened the door!”

“I’ll just let you guys have at it and head home,” Hal smiled, and began walking backwards.

“Wait! Er – give us your wallet at least,” the youth shrugged.

Without thinking, Hal started laughing, and tossed the kid his faded pleather wallet containing seven bucks, a discount store membership, his tennis club membership card, expired drivers’ license, and a debit card that he would cancel in the next five minutes. Then, as they tore away at the Porche’s roof and pristine paint job with their knives, he casually turned around, walked to the car, and drove home, putting the crappy day behind him.

CHAPTER TWO

Barry Chase had been sitting in the lobby of Le Club Raquette for ten minutes when Hal O’Grady finally entered. He passed most of the time pretending he didn’t notice the receptionist staring at him out of the corner of her eye with a non-comital smile, and the other half perfecting his own version of the smile and sneaking glances whenever the phone rang. This game was his favorite here at the club, and while he had achieved a mastery of just about every other sport offered, it still provided a challenge for him. The game was called “Aquaman” – after the woefully overlooked superhero -- and, while there were a specific rules written down on a bar napkin somewhere, the general idea was to get a girl to talk to you using only your telepathic powers to get her attention, the way Aquaman could summon fish to act like water skis. Barry had a slightly better than 50% average at the game, if you don’t count the three times he was convinced he’d caused girls to stumble into a table at a bar while walking in an otherwise straight line. Most people observed that this was a reasonably useless power, as someone with Barry’s rugged good looks would have a much higher success ratio just saying hello and asking for a girl’s number, but Barry defending this as being much more handy than summoning two Marlins to act as your water skis when you’re already a faster swimmer than they are.

Finally, Barry saw his best friend enter, looking more downtrodden and confused than usual. He rose, arms outstretched and gave him the biggest bear hug he could. “Hal, man, I am so sorry. How are you doin’?” he said hoping it would provide some measure of comfort, without trying to sound prodding.

“Hey, Barr, I’m fine,” Hal said patting him on the back. “Thanks for letting me in.”

“What happened to your membership card?”

“I’ll tell you later,” he scowled and rolled his eyes.

“You know we don’t have to do this. You’ve been through enough this week without me humiliating you on the court for two hours.”

“No, really, I think I do have to do this. I just need something to feel normal this week.”

Normal for the two of them was Barry, the more athletic of the two, holding back from outright humiliating Hal on the tennis court for the first hour, then slowly pretending to get tired over the course of the second, culminating in him possibly allowing Hal to win the last set -- if he thought he had earned it. Today, however, was far from normal, though Barry chalked it up to the atypically rough week that Hal had been through.

For the first two sets, Hal seemed to be playing at his normal level. By the second two, Barry was having a challenging time trying to play down to his level. "You want to take a break and get a smoothie or something? You seem a little weak in the knees today."

"I'm fine. Just tired." Hal held up his racket indicating he was ready for the next serve, which he wasn't. The ball shot right past him almost completely unnoticed.

"Sorry again, man. You know I loved your mom," Barry offered by way of excuse for Bob's performance. "Can I ask, did she go peacefully?"

"Very," Hal said. "It was all somewhat anticlimactic. I was playing her favorite song, and right about the time it ended she gasped a few times, that was it."

Hal served the ball, half-heartedly into the net, swore quietly, then with a bit more enthusiasm managed to get the second serve in play, if only barely. Barry returned it gingerly, setting Hal up for an easy volley instead of sending the ball down his opponent's through as he would have under any other circumstances.

"Your sister mentioned that. Apparently, she's not going to forgive you for the earworm any time soon."

"I feel like it's how Mom would have wanted to go. I just wish I could have done something a little grander. Like learned it on a guitar or something and sang it myself," Bob said then completely whiffed a chance at an easy return. He stopped and watched the ball bounce to the far wall behind him, then, appearing slightly wobbly on his feet wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his wrist band.

Barry laughed. "That is so you."

“Really? I’m not musical at all.”

“No, the whole ‘making everything perfect’ angle, trying to put meaning and symbolism in every life event so you can make sense of it. It’s charming, but wrong.”

“What’s so wrong about it?”

“Millions of people die every day, many for no good reason. Death can come get you at any moment. You’re never going to be ready; you’re probably going to be alone and scared, and odds are you’re not going to have an amateur musician providing the soundtrack.”

“Doesn’t mean we can’t try.”

“Don’t waste your life planning your death,” Barry said, his tone serious. To make his point, he allowed Hal’s returned ball to sail past him. He retrieved another from his pocket and began slowly dribbling it with his racquet. “When I was in the Marines, I lost three men in my unit.”

“Huh? You said you never saw combat. You were a security guard at a Naval base in Naples.”

“Not combat, I mean I physically lost them,” Barry frowned. “Three fresh young privates, straight out of basic, not two days on base. It was my job to show them the ropes, you know, teach them the ways of the locals.”

“In Naples.”

“It’s rougher than you’d think. Anyway, I got bogged down in paperwork and had completely forgotten how green these guys were. The first weekend, they left base with a 48-hour pass and headed straight for Piazza Garibaldi. That was the last time I saw them.”

“What’s Piazza Garibaldi?”

“Sort of Naples’ version of Chicken Breast Hill, only it doesn’t smell as good. Flash some American money around, tell ‘em you’re GI Joe and you can get anything dirt cheap. Rolex watches, bootleg CD’s, a palimony suit, you name it. Anyway, Steve got clipped by a messenger bus while crossing the street. Tony got passed a bunch of counterfeit euro notes and was arrested for using one to

try to buy a Coca-Cola with real sugar in it. He died in prison when they decided to donate a few of his organs he was using at the time. Alan was the worst. He died in flagrante dilecto.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.” Hal said, now blinking furiously and shaking his head as if to clear it.

“Not really. He accidentally gave the rest of Tony’s counterfeit euros to the pimp. The point is those guys were soldiers. They had planned to live long lives, but if they died in combat serving their country, that would be okay too, because it was a good death. They didn’t go through boot camp and all that intensive training to die ignominiously on their first weekend pass in country. Death comes at any time, sometimes unexpectedly. You can’t always make sense of it. Maybe sometimes you can, but sometimes fate has other plans.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Hal said and motioned for Barry to serve.

Barry, deciding to put the exclamation point on his little speech, elected to send a power-serve straight at Hal’s groin. To his surprise, Hal didn’t even try to defend himself, he simply allowed the ball to hit him squarely, after which he collapsed, soundlessly to the court like a rag doll spit out of a dog’s mouth.

It was five minutes before Barry realized he wasn’t joking around and something was desperately wrong with his best friend.

Barry spent twelve hours in the Emergency Room lobby, waiting for some word of Hal’s condition. He passed the first three hours playing his usual game of “Aquaman” with the various nurses that came on and off shift. He was currently beating the night shift 15 to 11. It wasn’t much of a challenge so he modified the game and began playing against a pale young woman with a gaunt frame who was bleeding profusely from the side of her head. She was good, he decided. The constant twitching, rubbing her nose, and scratching at her arms were an excellent fake out.

He was worried about Hal. Had he had some kind of heart attack? As far as Barry knew, there was no history of such things in Hal’s family, and as a P.E. teacher approaching middle-age, Hal always

seemed to be very conscientious of his diet and exercise habits. Perhaps it was just the stress of losing his mother. Hal couldn't have been sleeping or eating well for the past few weeks trying to balance, work and end-of-life care for his mom. Barry decided he never should have agreed to keeping their regular tennis game. Hal should have been home resting after all he'd been through lately.

When Hal finally emerged from the ER, he was ghost white and stumbling aimlessly down the long hallway to the receptionist's area. His arms were crossed, clutching a large manilla envelope against his chest as if it contained the secrets of the universe; his eyes had the distant gaze of someone who had just accidentally stumbled on them. He slowly paced towards the hospital exit in a line that definitely would not have passed muster in a field sobriety test. Barry leapt to his feet and ran to catch up with him. "Hey, Hal, you doin' okay? Where are you going?"

"I have to go back to the club and get my car," Hal said somberly, his eyes still focused on something two towns over.

"The club is nine miles away. Come on, I'll drive you."

"No, I'm good. Nice night for a walk." Hal's voice had no emotion in it. He simply continued walking. The ER's sliding glass doors parted without protest, and he continued out into the parking lot.

"Well, you should probably go back and at least give them your insurance card and check out."

"Oh, they have all that. They said not to bother with it and just go home. I'm coming back in two days for some more tests."

"Tests? What do you need tests for?"

"Oh, just second opinions, even though the experts are already pretty sure. They only poked and prodded me for the last three hours and took just about every bodily fluid they could hoping to find something else."

Hall crossed the parking lot, the sidewalk, and started to walk straight into the street without looking. Barry grabbed his arm and pulled him back to the sidewalk.

Hal seemed to notice him for the first time. His eyes had a fight or flight hint of madness to them. “How long have we been best friends?”

Barry thought for a moment. “Almost thirty years. Since the third grade.”

“Yeah.” Hal chuckled and started walking again, this time staying on the sidewalk. “We had chicken pox. They wouldn’t let us in school, but since we were both infected, our parents let us play together.”

“That’s right. They kept telling us we couldn’t scratch ourselves no matter how bad it itched—”

“—so we came up with the brilliant idea of scratching each other, figuring we had ingeniously found a loophole.”

“And we kept sneaking out and licking Wendy Davidson’s mail, hoping we could get her infected so she could hang out with us and we could scratch her too.” It was an innocent enough fantasy for a couple of eight-year-olds. Wendy was their proverbial “Third Musketeer,” and was always hanging out with them. Well, at least until she bloomed early and developed more of an interest in football players a few years older than her, and less on the two, still awkward kids who were more into watching movies on the couch than all that macho stuff. Of course, that lasted only a couple of years, and by the time they graduated, Hal was still just an unpopular with the ladies, but the star of the high school volleyball team.

Hal laughed and pulled his sleeve back. “I still have a few scars from how bad we scratched ourselves.”

“I still have a few scars from Wendy Davidson,” Barry reflected. Unlike Hal, he got over that awkwardness with women. “Is that what the tests are? You’ve got shingles or something now?”

“Weinrib-Živojinović Syndrome. Apparently, it’s pretty advanced.”

“Wineribzima what?”

Hal stopped abruptly at an intersection, then turned and handed Barry the folder. Seemingly oblivious, he then turned back and proceeded to cross the street. Two cars squealed their breaks and honked at him. He didn't seem to notice and kept walking.

Barry opened the folder. It contained a couple dozen different flyers and pamphlets. The one on the top caught his eye. It bore the words, "The Dying Process: What to Expect," in a calm scripted font. Barry's heart skipped a beat, and he darted across the intersection to catch up with Hal. "Uh, man, what do you have?"

"I told you, Weinrib-Živojinović Syndrome. They said it's extremely rare. Literally one in a million odds of getting it. Still, slightly better odds than winning the lottery."

"So, what is it?"

"Some kind of abnormal protein that attaches itself to cells, replicates itself in clumps, then attacks the nervous system and eventually the brain."

"That's why you collapsed then?"

Barry nodded. "They gave me a prescription to control the loss of motor coordination for the time being, but it's going to get worse. Eventually the pills won't help. When the protein hits the brain, it causes lesions, which lead to memory loss and dementia."

"So, what do you need, man? Blood? Bone marrow? A kidney? Just ask and you can have it."

"There's no cure. Like I said, only 200 people in the country have it. They don't exactly throw millions of research dollars at that kind of stuff."

"Then where did YOU get it?"

"It's a hereditary disease, Barry. It's likely that's what mom died from, but because she was older, her frequent falling and loss of memory were easily explained as basic dementia. They didn't even think to check for an extremely rare disease."

Barry said nothing, but continued to leaf through the folder, as if looking for an answer.

“They gave me a year, Barry. Maybe nine months before dementia sets in and the pills will stop working to stave off the loss of coordination. Then my personality will change, my eyesight will start to go, and I’ll be on a rapid descent just like mom. I’ll only be 35. I can’t end up like mom, Barry. I can’t let my sister go through that again so soon after the last time.”

“Hal, we’ll get through this, I’ve got your back,” Barry said, putting an arm on his shoulder.

“I know you do, man. I’m gonna go get my car and go home.”

“Let me drive you.”

“I think I want to walk.”

“It’s a three hour walk from here and not through the best neighborhoods.”

“I need time to process this. I’ll call you tomorrow.” With that, he turned and walked off into the night. Barry watched him go, feeling powerless to do anything. It was almost midnight, he was now a mile from his car, and still holding Hal’s folders. At least he had some reading material for the evening.

CHAPTER THREE

Victoria Montana cursed when the low fuel alarm started beeping its soft little chime. There was something about those soft, pleasant chimes that always set her off. It was the same tone an unruly passenger on an airplane would use to summon a stewardess and demand more ice for his drink. It was the same tone her voice assistant used to wake her up every morning, and which continued to play while she tried to get her dry mouth and half-asleep vocal cords to form the words that would shut it up – she was pretty sure the damned thing heard and understood her, but was purposely ignoring her just for fun. In fact, it wasn't too far off the tone her phone made to indicate her annoying boss was texting her to see if she was awake and could take a look at one of the servers that seemed to have taken itself offline – like the voice assistant, she was pretty sure the damned thing intentionally waited until after hours to break in order to save itself from her wrath. From 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM, Vicki ruled technology with almost unsurpassed skill. Once the sun went down, she felt like the machines were just testing the waters for their eventual robot uprising.

She pulled her car into the local gas station/convenience store/greasy spoon, walked around the side, and put the pump in her car.

It was then she heard the tell-tale buzzing, distant at first, but slowly growing determinedly louder. Showing no signs of recognition, she opened the door to the back seat, and deftly removed the taser from her purse. Oh, please, let it be tonight, she thought. She was a God-fearing woman, and didn't want to harm another human being unless absolutely necessary, but the thing had cost her \$400, and it was a shame she hadn't even got to use it yet.

Three scooters pulled off the road and into the gas station parking lot. The riders didn't appear to be the least bit interested in her, so she slid the taser into her coat pocket, selected her fuel grade, and worked the pump into the tank. As she did, she heard footsteps coming closer and suddenly regretted turning her back on the punks.

“Whazzap lady? How about givin' us a ride in your car?”

Vicki turned and gave the three a look that made them involuntarily take a step backwards. She was not a small woman, but extending herself to her full height, she seemed to tower over the other

three. “Now, do I LOOK like a damn Uber to you?” Her hand was ready to grab the taser, but she kept it away from the pocket. Her main problem was, she could only get one of them, and which point the other two would either panic and run, or beat the hell out of her. She just had to figure out which it was, and which of them she needed to take down.

She still hadn't made up her mind, when a voice cried out from across the street. “Hey!” All four turned and saw a half-crazed man running towards them. “You! Funny meeting you here!”

The would-be mugger in the middle, confused at first, smiled and laughed a little. “Hey, man. Hospital right? The guy who didn't own that Porche?”

The newcomer rolled his eyes. “Give me back my wallet, asshole!”

The three exchanged glances and broke out laughing all at once. “Man, get the fuck outta here with that tough guy stuff,” their leader said, extracting a knife from his boot and showing it to Hal.

Vicki noted the complete lack of fear on the man's face. Instead, there was some kind of desperation. She didn't think he was drunk or on anything, but he was definitely not in his right mind. This was confirmed when he extracted a squeegee from its plastic holster filled with blue liquid and began waving it at the three gang bangers, covering them with droplets of washer fluid. “Look man, I don't give a shit about your knife. I've just had the worst fucking day of my life. Have you got a gun on you? Because if you don't have a gun, I don't have the patience for your bullshit right now. Now, give me back my fucking wallet!”

The tallest of the three, standing in back, hurriedly removed his backpack, and began fumbling around in it. Oh shit, Vicki thought, they really did have a gun. What a stupid bluff. With all eyes on the newcomer, she put her left hand in her pocket and grabbed the butt on the taser. In retrospect, she would realize she should have drawn and shot the kid immediately, before he could produce a weapon. Instead, she waited, more curious to see what the stranger would do if they did try to kill him. It was quickly a moot point when the kid pulled out three wallets and held them up, offering them to the crazed man brandishing a squeegee.

“That, one, in the middle,” the man confirmed, and the mugger obliged by tossing it to him. The man opened it, inspected the contents and gave the three an insane glare. “There were eight dollars in

here!” He shrieked, putting the wallet in his back pocket with one hand and raising the windshield-cleaning implement over his head with his right.

All three robbers suddenly began backing away. Their leader pulling his own wallet out of his pants and tossing it at Hal. “Here man, take mine.”

The man caught the wallet, then before he could even protest, the three turned and ran away, leaving their scooters sitting on the sidewalk next to the convenience store entrance.

Vicki stared at the man, who stood motionless, a curious expression on his face. After about 45 seconds, he lowered the arm brandishing the makeshift weapon, calmly turned, and placed it back where he had found it. He glanced over at Vicki and said in the calmest, most soothing voice, “Are you okay?”

“Punkin’, I was about to ask YOU that.”

“Just a bad day, that’s all.”

“That’s why you’re walking around alone at 1AM in a neighborhood where white people like yourself come to die?”

The man laughed. “Something like that. They didn’t hurt you or anything did they?”

Vicki shot the man a quizzical look. He actually thought he’d saved her. She decided not to mention the taser in her pocket and let him have his imagined victory for the moment. After all, he looked like he needed it. “No, no. They didn’t. Thanks to you.”

He smiled and nodded. “I need a cup of coffee.” He opened the gang banger’s wallet and extracted a five-dollar bill. “Want a cup of coffee?”

Vicki shrugged and nodded, flowing him inside. The guy really did seem to have the best of intentions. She should at least make sure he wasn’t homeless or starving or anything.

The two sat, awkwardly at one of the booths at the Jon Howard's diner. Vicki watched the man closely for any signs of mental illness. As it was, he kept staring at his coffee, not drinking it. Every once in a while, he would pick up the gang banger's wallet, look at it, and return it to the table without going through it. "My names Hal O'Grady," he finally offered as if confessing. "I suppose if you want to turn me over to the police for mugging those kids, I won't argue or try to escape or anything."

This was too much. Vicki started laughing. "Vicki Montana. And what makes you think the police give a damn about you mugging a scooter gang? Hell, I was there, Punkin, you accidentally robbed them at best. Hell, you're damn lucky to be alive. What were you thinking trying to start shit with three of them over eight dollars in a wallet? In fact, no, give me that thing," she snatched the wallet off the table and started going through it, triumphantly extracting a driver's license. "Anthony Pearson," she said reading off his home address and personal stats. "Your life is about to get real interesting ... you little peckerhead."

"You gonna turn him in?"

"Fuck no, I'm gonna spend the next six months making this shit for brains WISH the police would care enough about this skinny ass to arrest him. My crew and I live for this kind of shit."

"Wait, you're in a gang? What, organized crime?"

"Hackers, Punkin. We're kinda famous on the dark web. I don't suppose you know anything about that stuff though? What are you, a youth minister?"

"Jr High teacher."

Vicki regarded him, impressed. "Maybe you do know then."

"Girls P.E. coach. In the suburbs."

"Shit. Well, I don't know how Buffy and Heather settle shit out there, but by this time tomorrow, I'm gonna have this boy's power, water, and phone shut off, and sign him to get hourly visits from Army recruiters, Jehovas Witnesses, and window salespeople. You ever try to get rid of a window salesperson? You can't. Then next week I go all biblical on his ass and get him up close an personal with the ten plagues. I got one friend who can get cockroach pheromones by the gallon. Put some of that in

an envelope and mail it to him? Ol' boy will be more popular than the dumpster at a Mexican restaurant wherever he goes."

"Remind me not to get on your bad side."

"Hey, nobody messes with Vicky Montana. At least, not twice. You got your mad skills with window washing implements. Mine are a bit more subtle."

Hal smiled to himself. "That was pretty stupid wasn't it?"

"What's so important about that wallet you had to have it back?"

"Well, my Club Racquet membership card was in there. You know how hard it is to get a replacement, especially without even a valid driver's license?"

"Yeah, you're some tough guy who goes all Charles Bronson on three hoodlums for stealing his country club card? I don't think so." She looked at him expectantly with that expression she found made most people trust her instantly.

Hal took a sip from his coffee and looked out the window at nothing in particular for a moment.

"What would you do if nothing mattered anymore, and you knew you were going to die?"

"We're all going to die. I don't think those punks are killers though. Might whoop your ass, but I doubt they'd kill you."

"Not what I meant," Hal said, looking her in the eyes for the first time.

Suddenly it all became clear. "Oh, Punkin, I'm so sorry."

"I just found out a few hours ago. I think I'm still in denial." He waived the topic off. "Question stands. What would you do? I'd really like to know."

Vicki sat back and thought for a moment. "Well, I definitely wouldn't waste my time going to some revenge kick to get my wallet back from a scooter gang." She took a sip of coffee and thought about it some more. "I think I'd probably just make it all about me. Screw friends and family. I don't

want to be a burden to them. I'd probably just make a list of all the things I want to do, all the places I want to see, then sell everything and just hit the open road. Then, when I got through the list, I'd find a quiet place to end up. My family and friends won't even know when I pass. That way to them I don't go in the ground and get forgotten. I'm still alive and in their minds, because they'll always wonder what ever happened to me, and if I was still out there somewhere."

"I kinda like that idea. It makes a twisted kind of sense, really."

"You see, they say you die twice. Once when they put you in the ground, and then again when someone says your name for the last time. Now, to me, that means you better go out doin' something that keep 'em talking for a few years. I mean, unless you're famous enough they named a building or a street after you or something."

Hal was deep in thought now, and Vicki was worried he was going to a dark place. She hated to pry. This was a stranger, after all, but he seemed a nice kid dealing with a lot more than anyone should have to deal with so young.

"So," she said at last, "Any thought as to what you're going to do? I assume the reason you're wandering the streets in the middle of the night is because you have no family or anyone else to help you carry this load."

Hal started at the thought, "No, I mean, good God, you're right, I didn't mean to dump any of this on you, I—"

"Punkin' it's fine. I was a mother once." She patted his hand gently. "To be honest, I kinda miss taking care of folks. Plus, you did save my life and buy me a coffee after all." She tried to look him in the eyes, but he seemed embarrassed by the situation. "You really don't have anyone?"

"Not that I can burden with this. At least not right now." He sat up straight, took a deep breath, and a swig of coffee.

"So what are you going to do?"

“I don’t know. Maybe just cash in my savings. Have a big party. Invite everyone I’ve ever known in my life – people I haven’t seen since I was a kid. Call it my ‘going away party.’ Just don’t tell anyone where I’m going.”

“Now, that sounds depressing.”

“Why? I’d make it an open bar.”

“Because you’re living in the past. You have a unique perspective. Look, if you’re in an amusement park, and it’s closing in an hour, do you gather everybody up and talk about how much fun you had all day? No, you go on the best ride again, or better yet, you go get on the ride you missed out on because you were either too scared or just didn’t get around to it.”

Hal smiled, “You have a point there.”

“Of course I do. Now, what you need to do is start making a list. Don’t just list places you want to go. List experiences you want to have. Think back on all the times you felt really alive, when you said to yourself, ‘Wow, that was great, I’ve got to do that again someday.’ Then you don’t wait around. You start on that as soon as you can. Don’t waste any more days.” She opened her purse and pulled out a business card, wrote her phone number on the back, and slid it across the table to Hal. “Now, I don’t normally give these out to strange men, but you seem to be harmless. You call me. Any time. If you get low and you don’t think you have anyone to talk to. If you have a great experience and want to tell someone. Even if you just want to talk. Call me. Like I said, I kinda miss bein’ a mamma.”

Hal regarded the card for a moment and slipped it in his pocket. “Thanks, Vicky. I’m glad I met you.”

APPENDIX

About the Author

Darrin Snider is an award-winning Internet radio and podcast host, cloud engineer, analytics wizard, mannequin wrangler, recovering software developer, and resident expert on the Indianapolis local music scene. His hobbies include baseball, strategy gaming, the occasional RPG, voraciously reading everything in sight, DX-ing exotic radio streams around the world, quantum physics, day trading, comic books, old-time radio, the technological singularity, wuxia/chop-socky flicks, cyber/techno culture, imported teas, transhumanism, dead programming languages, and speedwriting first drafts of novels (mostly to get the NaNoWriMo certificates) which he locks away as part of some grand retirement scheme should he live that long.



Afterword

These first three chapters of the "latest (not final) draft" are offered free of charge. If you enjoyed them, drop me a line, and I'll add you to a list to receive a copy of the final book and possibly some other goodies along the way. If you're a publisher, potential alpha reader, or bookworm like me that doesn't care if it's a bad draft, and you would like to see the full outline or other existing parts of this novel as a prelude to helping edit or publish it, I can probably make that happen too.

Links

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